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Looking back: It's

Today's bands have a tough act to follow – and we can still hear the echoes of the 1960s in their work

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I've been on a Jimi Hendrix kick recently, lured by West Coast Seattle Boy, a new four-CD box-set tracing the guitar immortal's progress from R&B backup session man to superstar improviser. Acrobat of the electric guitar, feedback-riding shaman, psychedelic bluesman extraordinaire, peerless explorer (and showman), this is the true spirit-soul of Hendrix – and one of the most vital gobs of music released last year.

Geez, I say to myself, there's nothing out there that can match this! Then I catch myself in the classic boomer (b. 1946) stance. The mythology of '60s music is so-o-o hard to escape. Being a boomer means forever celebrating musical milestones. For some it's an albatross that prevents them from listening to the here and now.

Back then rock music was a soundtrack for great social changes; there's a case to be made that it drove those changes. These days it's wallpaper, product-placement for consumer spending. Humph.

Today the stakes don't seem as high musically as they were in the '60s, and boomers are resented for the baggage they bring; they sound like the parents they once rebelled against ("Ah, those were the days!"). So: Are the '60s overrated, or do they remain the standard of creativity, when seemingly every week new amazements on Top 40 radio advanced rock as a hybridized genre – rhythm & blues, folk-rock, acid rock, art-rock, jazz-rock, heavy-metal.

Last year Rolling Stone published a "special collectors edition" celebrating the 500 Greatest Songs of All Time (generational hubris that ignored the Great American Songbook of pre-1950 music). The 1960s dominated the listing with 195 entries (compared with a puny 21 and 27 for the 1980s and 2000s respectively). Could this really be so, or is this a case of baby boomers lording it over everyone else?

I can't argue with many of the choices – but then I wonder how nostalgia, which tends to curdle objectivity, figures into the equation (i.e., the selection of Chapel of Love by the Dixie-Cups drips nostalgia). I'd like to think I've moved on, my musical interests having broadened to include jazz, classical, electronica, blues, reggae, post-rock, you name it. Like an adolescent, I wanna dig into as much as I can – because popular recorded music has been the true barometer of the times over the past 100 years – but, to twist a '60s song, time is not on my side. The hallowed Sixties keep getting in the way. I mean, once you play You Really Got Me, you want to hear the Kinks' Greatest Hits.

By 1966, announced Paul Williams, editor-publisher of the seminal fanzine Crawdaddy, rock had become "the arbiter of quality, the music of today. The Doors, Brian Wilson, the Stones are modern music, and contemporary 'jazz' and 'classical' composers must try to measure up." That goes for today's acts: can they possibly have the impact that "classic rock" did?

The list of '60s pop icons is daunting: The Beatles, of course, and Hendrix and Bob Dylan, James Brown, Frank Zappa, Serge Gainsbourg, Phil Spector, Aretha Franklin, Smokey Robinson and Motown and Stax, the Stones and Kinks, Beach Boys and Doors, Led Zeppelin. All of their changes stuck, big time. Are the originals still the greatest? Where does that leave generations to follow?

Epic singles that defined the new art of recording – You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling, A Day in the Life, Eight Miles High, Like A Rolling Stone, Mr. Tambourine Man (Byrds version), (I Can't Get No) Satisfaction, Good Vibrations, Light My Fire, Purple Haze, Papa's Got A Brand New Bag, River Deep Mountain High, Street Fighting Man – headed to the top of the charts. In my mind's eye they're still up there – along with dozens of other '60s releases.

The sheer availability of old recordings – spiffy remastered reissues through the Internet – guarantees this music is part of today's musical conversation. It's only natural that informed twentysomething acts and meloomanes alike have a broad knowledge of the canon. Inevitably, today's music competes with the past.

Of course, dividing music into decades is merely a convenient time marker; music is a crazy-house continuum. And while rock 'n' roll arrived in the '50s, thanks to Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley and Elvis Presley, it was quickly subsumed by the manufactured teen idols who performed on Dick Clark's American Bandstand.

The Beatles, seen here in 1964, were the defining band of the 1960s, and their songs I Want to Hold Your Hand and I Saw Her Standing There changed the music scene almost instantly.

The music of guitar legend Jimi Hendrix is chronicled on a recent four-CD box set called West Coast Seattle Boy that illustrates why the mythology of '60s music is so hard to escape.

The Beach Boys (from left: Carl Wilson, Dennis Wilson, Mike Love, Al Jardine and Brian Wilson), hit the charts with surf pop and became more experimental with songs like Good Vibrations.

The spiritual sound of Aretha Franklin's voice still drowns out today's wannabe divas, with their over-the-top pipes and posturing.

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